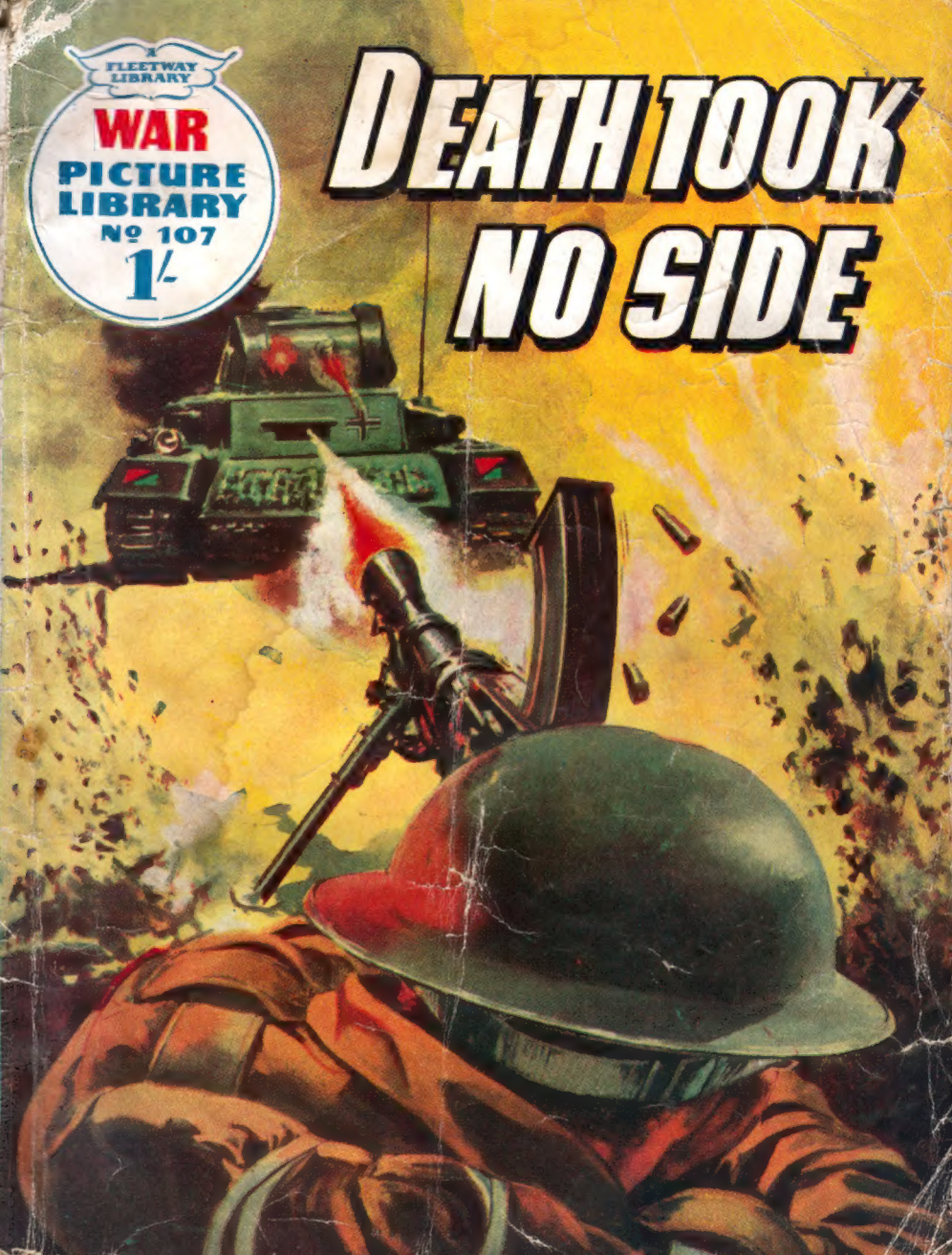
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DEATH TOOK NO SIDE

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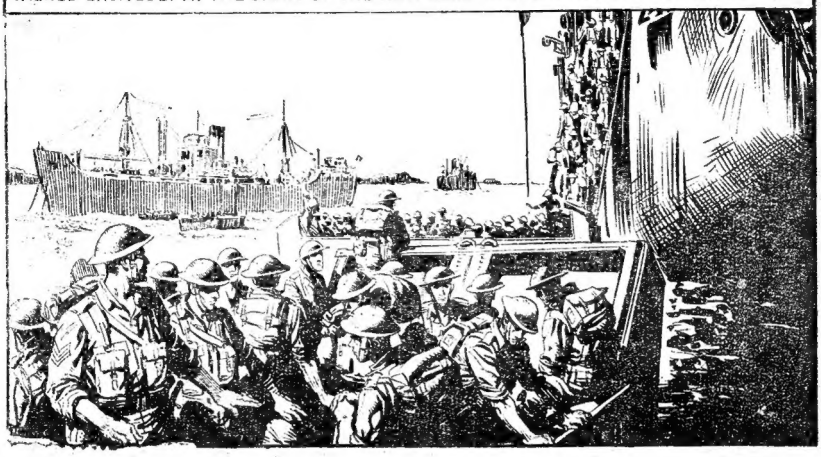
Chapter 1. CRISIS in the DESERT

THE BRITISH TWO-POUNDER ANTI-TANK GUNS WERE NO MATCH FOR THE 45-TON PANZERS AND WITH NOTHING TO STOP THEM, THE HEAVILY-ARMOURED MONSTERS TURNED THEIR GUNS ON THE BRITISH INFANTRY. . . .

GRIMLY, THE BRITISH TROOPS FOUGHT ON . . . BUT THIS WAS A LOSING BATTLE AND NONE KNEW IT BETTER THAN THEIR BATTALION COMMANDER.

THE AGONISING PROSPECT FACING COLONEL MASTERS WAS THE DESTRUCTION OF HIS ENTIRE COMMAND . . .

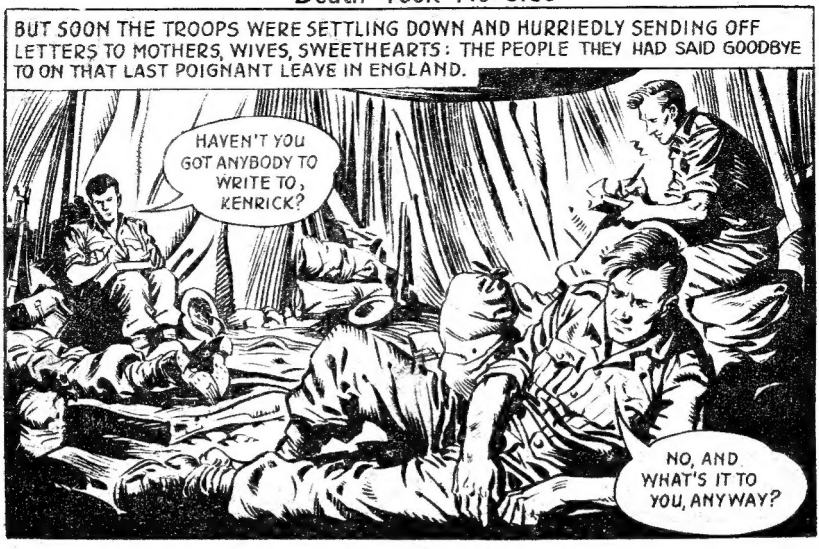
AT THE PORT OF SUEZ, 700 MILES AWAY, THE REINFORCEMENTS WERE COMING ASHORE. WEARY OF THE SEA AFTER THEIR SIX-WEEKS' JOURNEY ROUND THE CAPE, THEY JOKED AND TALKED EXCITEDLY AT THE SIGHT OF THE NEW LAND THAT LAY IN FRONT OF THEM.



EXCEPT FOR ONE MAN, PRIVATE FRANK KENRICK, WHO SAT ALONE, SOURLY WATCHING HIS CHATTERING FELLOWS. NO ONE SPOKE TO HIM FOR THEY HAD LEARNT LONG SINCE THAT TO DO SO ONLY BROUGHT A REBUFF OF BITING HOSTILITY.

A LONELY EMBITTERED MAN, FRANK KENRICK HAD BEEN ABANDONED AS A CHILD. THERE WAS NOBODY HE COULD CALL A FRIEND . . . AND AS FAR AS HE WAS CONCERNED, IT COULD STAY THAT WAY.
COME ON, JOE. UPS-A-DAISY!
PHEW! THESE KITBAGS WEIGH A TON.

AT THE BASE CAMP NEAR CAIRO, THE SOLDIERS HAD THEIR FIRST TASTE OF LIFE IN THE DESERT . . . THE BARE, INHOSPITABLE TENTS PITCHED ON THE GRITTY SAND THAT WAS TO BECOME PART OF THEIR EXISTENCE.
NEXT EIGHT IN HERE
WOT, NO CARPET ON THE FLOOR!
JUST LIKE HOME. I DON'T THINK


BUT SOON THE TROOPS WERE SETTLING DOWN AND HURRIEDLY SENDING OFF LETTERS TO MOTHERS, WIVES, SWEETHEARTS: THE PEOPLE THEY HAD SAID GOODBYE TO ON THAT LAST POIGNANT LEAVE IN ENGLAND.
HAVEN'T YOU GOT ANYBODY TO WRITE TO, KENRICK?
NO, AND WHAT'S IT TO YOU, ANYWAY?

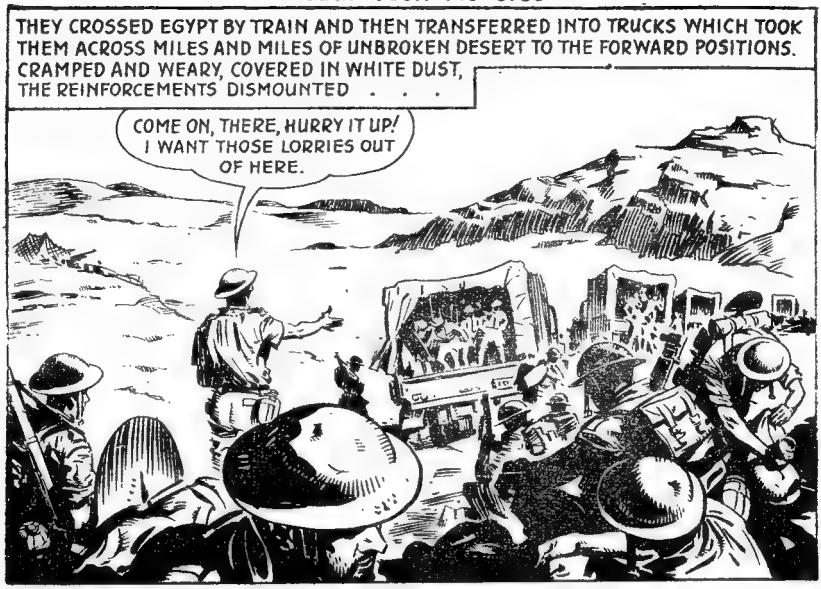
KENRICK WAS AN UGLY CUSTOMER WHEN ROUSED AND IT WAS PERILOUSLY EASY TO CROSS HIM.
I ONLY ASKED BECAUSE IT SEEMED A BIT FUNNY...
KEEP YOUR BIG MOUTH SHUT ... OR I'LL SHUT IT WITH THIS. SEE?

KENRICK STRODE ANGRILY OUT OF THE TENT HE HAD MADE HIS POINT . . . HE WANTED NO QUESTIONS AND NO FRIENDSHIP FROM ANYBODY.
WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH HIM? I ONLY ASKED A CIVIL QUESTION.
HE WAS LIKE THAT ON THE BOAT... HATES EVERYBODY. BEST LEAVE HIM ALONE.

NO TIME WAS WASTED IN GETTING THE MEN DESERT-HARDENED. THEY TOILED, CURSING, OVER THAT MUSCLE-SAPPING SAND.
COME ON THEN, **DOUBLE**, I SAID. MOVE . . . **MOVE!**

THE HATRED FOR ALL MANKIND THAT WELLED IN KENRICK FOUND SOME SLIGHT RELIEF IN BAYONET PRACTICE. A FIERCE EXULTATION WOULD GRIP HIM AS HE SLAMMED HOME THE MURDEROUS STEEL . . .
GET YOUR WEIGHT BEHIND IT. GOOD, GOOD!
YAAAAH!

BUT THE TRAINING WAS SHORT. THE FRONT LINE, WILTING UNDER THE WEIGHT OF ROMMEL'S ATTACK, NEEDED THESE MEN AT ONCE.
THIS IS THE MOMENT YOU HAVE TRAINED FOR . . . THE TIME TO FIGHT FOR YOUR KING AND YOUR COUNTRY AND THROW THE NAZIS OUT OF NORTH AFRICA. GIVE OF YOUR BEST, LADS . . . AND GOOD LUCK TO YOU ALL.
SOME HOPE. I'M FIGHTING FOR NOBODY BUT MYSELF.


THEY CROSSED EGYPT BY TRAIN AND THEN TRANSFERRED INTO TRUCKS WHICH TOOK THEM ACROSS MILES AND MILES OF UNBROKEN DESERT TO THE FORWARD POSITIONS. CRAMPED AND WEARY, COVERED IN WHITE DUST, THE REINFORCEMENTS DISMOUNTED . . .
COME ON, THERE, HURRY IT UP! I WANT THOSE LORRIES OUT OF HERE.

THE NEWCOMERS WERE ALLOCATED WITHOUT DELAY TO PLATOONS AND JUST AS SWIFTLY FOUND THEMSELVES DIGGING IN, HARRIED AT EVERY MOMENT BY THE TOUGH SERGEANT MAJOR.
DIG, CURSE YOU, DIG! I WANT EVERYONE OF YOU FOUR FEET DOWN. DIG!
WHAT'RE WE DIGGING... OUR GRAVES?

BUT THE NEED FOR HASTE WAS SOON MADE VERY CLEAR. SUDDENLY, WITH A THUD AND AN EXPLOSIVE ROAR, A SHELL BURST AMONGST THE FOX-HOLES.
TAKE COVER!

GERMAN ARTILLERY HAD SIGHTED THE MOVEMENT IN THE AREA AND A BOX-BARRAGE BLANKETED THE FORWARD POSITIONS.

KENRICK SUDDENLY REALISED HE WAS BEING FORCED TO FIGHT . . . WHETHER HE LIKED IT OR NOT!
ALL RIGHT... I'LL FIGHT... BUT I'LL NOT RISK MY NECK FOR ANYBODY. NOBODY GIVES A DARN FOR ME!

THE GROUND WAS SHAKING TO THE FURY OF THE BOMBARDMENT AND ONE NEAR MISS SENT SAND AND STONES SHOWERING OVER KENRICK AND THE MAN WITH HIM.

THE TWO MEN PICKED THEMSELVES UP AND WERE AMAZED TO FIND THEY WERE UNHURT. NOT SO LUCKY, HOWEVER, WAS ONE OF THE OCCUPANTS OF A WEAPON PIT . . . THOUGH HE HAD BEEN FARTHER FROM THE BLAST.
I'VE BEEN HIT! I'VE BEEN WOUNDED!
COR! I THOUGHT WE'D HAD IT. YOU ALL RIGHT, KENRICK?

IN CHARGE OF THE WEAPON PIT WAS CORPORAL JOCK McTAGGART, A COOL, LEVEL-HEADED SCOT.
YOU'VE JUST GOT A PIECE OF SHRAPNEL IN YOUR SHOULDER, LADDIE YOU CAN STILL RUN, CAN YOU NOT? WELL, OFF YOU GO TO COMPANY H.Q. . . . THEY'LL SEE TO YOU THERE.
Y...YES CORP.

AS THE WOUNDED MAN RAN, CROUCHING, TO THE COMPARATIVE SAFETY OF COMPANY H.Q., THE CORPORAL PROMPTLY REARRANGED HIS FORCES.
HEY, YOU! OVER HERE, QUICKLY.

IT WAS KENRICK WHO SCRAMBLED OVER THE INTERVENING SAND AND DROPPED INTO THE BREN GUN-PIT. JOCK MC TAGGART WASTED NO TIME . . .
CAN YOU HANDLE A BREN, LADDIE?

KENRICK HAD A NATURAL AFFINITY FOR WEAPONS AND IN THIS RESPECT, HAD ABSORBED EVERYTHING THE ARMY HAD TAUGHT HIM.
YES, I KNOW ABOUT A BREN.
FINE, FINE. THEN YOU STAY HERE WITH ME . . . YOU'LL BE MORE USE THAN YOU WOULD WITH A RIFLE.

THE GERMAN BARRAGE HAD NOT CEASED FOR A MOMENT, BATTERING REMORSELESSLY AT THE SENSES. EVEN SO, KENRICK AND THE CORPORAL BECAME AWARE OF A NEW SOUND . . . THE SOUND OF A MAN'S FRIGHTENED CRIES.
OOOH! WHY DOESN'T IT STOP... THE NOISE ...THE NOISE ...
PAH! HE'LL BE CRYING FOR HIS MOTHER NEXT.
HAVE YOU NOT GOT A MOTHER, LADDIE?
KENRICK NEVER KNEW WHY HE SUDDENLY ADMITTED SOMETHING HE HAD NEVER SPOKEN ABOUT TO ANYONE ELSE.
I NEVER KNEW WHO MY MOTHER WAS.
WELL, NEITHER DID I! PERHAPS WE SHOULD ENVY YON LAD . . AND TRY TO UNDERSTAND HIM.
BUT BEFORE KENRICK HAD TIME TO REPLY TO THIS SURPRISING STATEMENT, THE BARRAGE STOPPED AS IF IT HAD BEEN CUT OFF WITH A KNIFE. AN OMINOUS SILENCE FOLLOWED . . .
THEIR INFANTRY WILL BE THROUGH ANY MINUTE NOW, AND THEN THEY'LL BE TRYING TO LIFT THOSE MINES. CAN YOU SEE ANYTHING?
NO...THERE'S TOO MUCH DUST.

THE MINEFIELD STRETCHING IN FRONT OF THEM WAS INTENDED PRIMARILY TO STOP THE GERMAN TANKS. IT WAS A TASK FORCE OF STORM TROOPERS AND ENGINEERS WHO MATERIALISED OUT OF THE DUST.

WITH SHARP, ACCURATE BURSTS, THE CORPORAL CUT TERRIBLE GAPS IN THE ADVANCING WAVES OF GERMANS. THE BREN WAS HIS PRIDE AND JOY AND HE KNEW HOW TO USE IT!

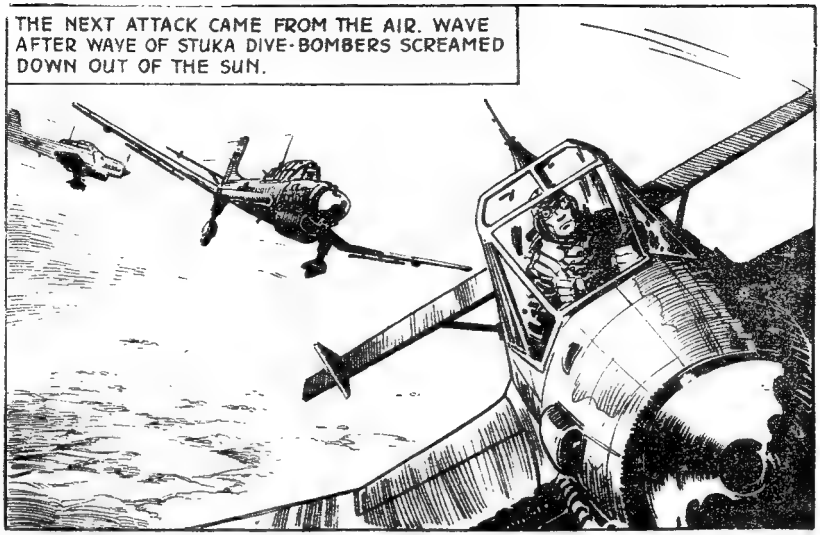
THE ATTACK FALTERED . . THE MINES REMAINED UNDISTURBED . . . AND THE ENEMY WERE FORCED TO THROW THE MALIGNANT WEIGHT OF THEIR PANZERS INTO THE BATTLE.
FORWARD!

TWO TANKS WERE WRECKED ALMOST AT ONCE AS MINES EXPLODED BENEATH THEIR VULNERABLE TRACKS. THE LINE OF ARMOUR SLOWED AND BEGAN TO BACK AWAY FROM THE HIDDEN DEATH IN THE SAND . . .

THERE WAS A LULL; THE FIRING DIED AWAY. BOTH SIDES BEGAN TO COUNT THE COST OF THAT FIRST CLASH OF ARMS.
ROUND ONE TO US. YOU DID WELL THERE, LADDIE.

KENRICK GRUNTED A REPLY AS HE TURNED UNCOMFORTABLY AWAY. HE WOULD NOT ADMIT EVEN TO HIMSELF THAT HE HAD RESPONDED TO THE THRILL OF FIGHTING ALONGSIDE THIS MAN.
YEAH. I'LL GET SOME MORE MAGAZINES.

THEY SAT AND SWEATED, AND WAITED. THE CORPORAL HAD CHECKED THE POSITIONS OF HIS SECTION AND NOW HE SQUATTED WITH KENRICK IN THEIR FOX-HOLE.
GO EASY WITH THAT WATER, LADDIE! YOU'LL GET NO MORE TODAY.

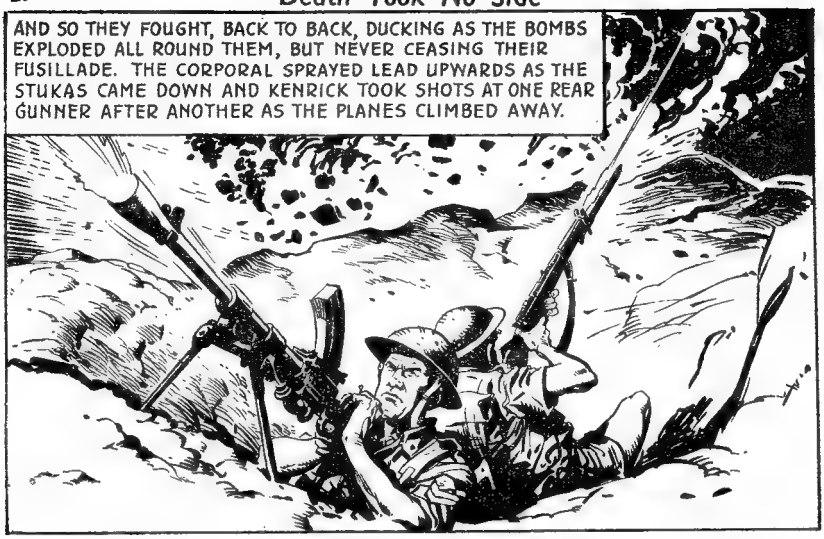

THE NEXT ATTACK CAME FROM THE AIR. WAVE AFTER WAVE OF STUKA DIVE-BOMBERS SCREAMED DOWN OUT OF THE SUN.

SECTIONS OF THE STUKAS ATTACKED THE BRITISH ARTILLERY WHILE OTHERS CONCENTRATED ON THE INFANTRY POSITIONS IN THE FRONT LINE.

WITH THE MUZZLE OF THE BREN ELEVATED, CORPORAL MC TAGGART WAS SOON ADDING HIS QUOTA TO THE WEIGHT OF BULLET AND SHELL HURLED UPWARDS TO GREET THOSE EVIL BIRDS OF DESTRUCTION.

GET YOUR RIFLE, LADDIE. HAVE A GO AT THE REAR GUNNER OF THIS ONE AS HE GOES BY.

ITS BOMB RELEASED, THE STUKA CLIMBED AWAY AND KENRICK CRACKED OFF A COUPLE OF ROUNDS AT THE REAR GUNNER, WHO WAS BUSILY HOSING THE BRITISH LINES.


AND SO THEY FOUGHT, BACK TO BACK, DUCKING AS THE BOMBS EXPLODED ALL ROUND THEM, BUT NEVER CEASING THEIR FUSILLADE. THE CORPORAL SPRAYED LEAD UPWARDS AS THE STUKAS CAME DOWN AND KENRICK TOOK SHOTS AT ONE REAR GUNNER AFTER ANOTHER AS THE PLANES CLIMBED AWAY.

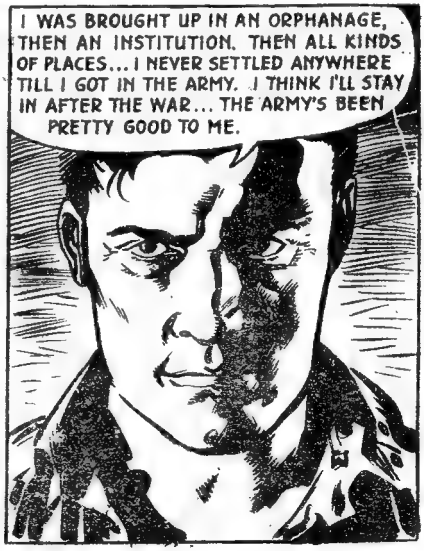
THEN ONCE MORE IT WAS QUIET, THE STUKAS GONE, ONE OF THEIR NUMBER TRAILING BLACK SMOKE AND FALLING LOWER AND LOWER AS HE LIMPED AFTER HIS COMPANIONS. FOR ALL THEIR NOISE AND FURY THEY HAD DONE LITTLE DAMAGE.
NO CASUALTIES HERE, SIR.
GOOD! I'M AFRAID THERE WERE THREE WOUNDED AND TWO KILLED IN SEVENTEEN PLATOON, BUT IT COULD HAVE BEEN A LOT WORSE .. EH, CORPORAL?

DESPITE HIMSELF, KENRICK FOUND HE WAS WARMING TO THE GOOD-NATURED PERSONALITY OF THE SCOTS CORPORAL.
Y'SEE, THEY DON'T AIM SO GOOD IF YOU KEEP FIRING. EVEN THE JERRIES GET NERVOUS IF THERE'S LEAD COMING AT 'EM!
SOMEBODY HIT THAT LAST ONE DO YOU THINK IT WAS YOU?
IT COULD HAVE BEEN ANYBODY IN THE WHOLE PLATOON. MAYBE IT WAS YOU!

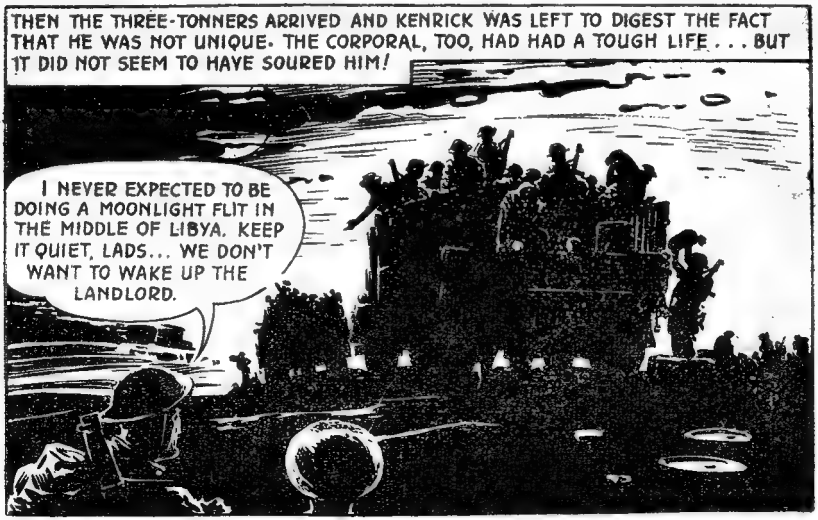
Chapter 2. TOBRUK FALLS

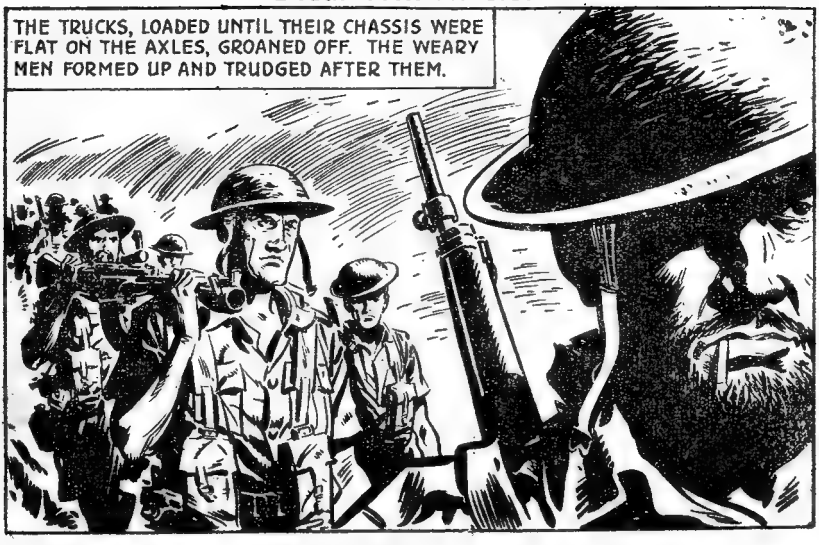
AS NIGHT SHROUDED THE DESERT, THE COMPANY BEGAN TO PACK ITS EQUIPMENT. SOON ALL THAT REMAINED OF THE POSITION WAS A SERIES OF GAPING HOLES.
DOESN'T LOOK MUCH LIKE HOME NOW, DOES IT?
HUH! I NEVER HAD A HOME, CORPORAL, NOT A PROPER ONE, SO I WOULDN'T KNOW.

WELL, I DINNA KNOW WHY I SAID THAT, LADDIE, BECAUSE NEITHER DID I.
YEAH? YOU DON'T EXPECT ME TO BELIEVE THAT?


I WAS BROUGHT UP IN AN ORPHANAGE, THEN AN INSTITUTION. THEN ALL KINDS OF PLACES... I NEVER SETTLED ANYWHERE TILL I GOT IN THE ARMY. I THINK I'LL STAY IN AFTER THE WAR... THE ARMY'S BEEN PRETTY GOOD TO ME.

YOU THINK THIS IS GOOD?
OCH, NOT THIS... BUT YOU MEET SOME GOOD FELLOWS... I'VE HAD SOME FINE TIMES.


THEN THE THREE-TONNERS ARRIVED AND KENRICK WAS LEFT TO DIGEST THE FACT THAT HE WAS NOT UNIQUE. THE CORPORAL, TOO, HAD HAD A TOUGH LIFE... BUT IT DID NOT SEEM TO HAVE SOURED HIM!
I NEVER EXPECTED TO BE DOING A MOONLIGHT FLIT IN THE MIDDLE OF LIBYA. KEEP IT QUIET, LADS... WE DON'T WANT TO WAKE UP THE LANDLORD.


THE TRUCKS, LOADED UNTIL THEIR CHASSIS WERE FLAT ON THE AXLES, GROANED OFF. THE WEARY MEN FORMED UP AND TRUDGED AFTER THEM.

EYELIDS DROOPED FOR WANT OF SLEEP AND MUSCLES BURNED IN DULL PAIN UNTIL AT LENGTH, THEY WERE ALLOWED TO REST.
THE GAP IN THE MINEFIELD IS STRAIGHT AHEAD, CORPORAL. YOUR NEW POSITIONS AREN'T FAR FROM THE GAP. BUT HAVE A GOOD LOOK ROUND BEFORE YOU GO IN . . . WE'LL HAVE TO SEND OUT SOME PATROLS TONIGHT. .

NO SOONER HAD THEY ARRIVED IN THEIR NEW POSITION THAN THEIR OLD ENEMY, THE SERGEANT-MAJOR, WAS HARRYING THEM ONCE MORE.

BUT AT LENGTH THE TRENCHES WERE DEEP ENOUGH FOR THE MEN TO LIE IN AND BE SAFE FROM SHELL-SPLINTERS AND BULLETS. ALL THAT DAY THEY SPRAWLED IN THEM, WHILE ENEMY RECONNAISSANCE AIRCRAFT DRONED BACK AND FORTH OVERHEAD.

SLEEP WAS A PRECIOUS THING TO BE GRABBED WHENEVER THERE WAS TIME FOR IT... NIGHT HAD TO BE USED FOR OTHER THINGS . . .

THE SENTRY GUARDING THEIR SIDE OF THE MINEFIELD GAP HAD CHALLENGED THEM AND BEEN ANSWERED AND NOW THEY WERE THROUGH THE MINEFIELD AND THERE WAS NOTHING BEYOND BUT THE DESERT AND THE ENEMY.

CAUTIOUSLY THEY WORKED THEIR WAY FORWARD, FREEZING . . . EVERY ONE FLAT ON THE GROUND . . AS DARK SHAPES LOOMED UP IN FRONT, EASING FORWARD AGAIN WHEN THEY DISCOVERED THAT IT WAS ONLY A CLUMP OF CAMEL THORN. THEN, SUDDENLY, THEY HEARD VOICES AHEAD OF THEM . . . ITALIAN VOICES.

THE DESERT WAS BROKEN BY A LOW ROCKY ESCARPMENT AND IN ITS SHELTER WAS ONE OF THE ADVANCE UNITS OF THE ENEMY. BUT THEY HAD TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THAT UNIT.

MATTLEY, YOU STAY HERE; KENRICK, JOHNSON, I WANT YOU FIFTY YARDS EACH SIDE OF ME. WE GO UP TO THE TOP OF THE RISE AND SEE WHAT GOES ON. THEN WE COME BACK HERE. THE PASSWORD IS DOROTHY . . . DON'T FORGET IT/

AS HE SQUIRMED FORWARD KENRICK FOUND THAT THE ROUGH GROUND CONTINUALLY HID THE CORPORAL FROM VIEW. THE VOICES THEY HAD HEARD HAD STILLED, BUT AT EVERY MOMENT HE FEARED THE WARNING SHOUT OF A SENTRY.

AT LAST, UNSEEN, HE REACHED THE TOP OF THE RISE AND LOOKED DOWN INTO THE WADI BEYOND.

BUT AS HIS EYES STRAINED TO TAKE IN DETAILS OF THE SCENE, A FLARE BURST OVERHEAD AND FLOODED EVERYTHING WITH LIGHT! THE QUIET OF THE NIGHT WAS SHATTERED BY THE CLATTER OF MACHINE-GUNS.

KENRICK PRESSED HIMSELF TO THE GROUND, BUT AS THE FLARE DIED AND THE COMMOTION CEASED, HE REALISED THAT HE HAD NOT BEEN THE TARGET.

AND THAT DUST-UP WAS ON THE RIGHT SO IT WASN'T ANYTHING TO DO WITH OUR PATROL BECAUSE THEY'RE ON MY LEFT. I BET THEY THOUGHT IT WAS ME...THEY'LL THINK I'VE HAD IT...

AND SUDDENLY KENRICK REALISED THAT THIS WAS HIS CHANCE. HE COULD STAY WHERE HE WAS UNTIL IT WAS LIGHT AND THEN SURRENDER TO THE ITALIAN UNIT BELOW HIM!

THEN THE WAR WOULD BE OVER FOR ME. WHY SHOULD I RISK MY SKIN?

BUT EVEN AS THE THOUGHT CAME TO HIM, KENRICK TURNED AND STARTED TO CRAWL BACK TO THE RENDEZVOUS, BACK TO JOIN CORPORAL MC TAGGART AND THE OTHERS.

NO, I SUPPOSE I'D BETTER GET BACK. THE CORPORAL'S A DECENT ENOUGH CHAP ANYWAY, HE'S ABOUT THE ONLY BLOKE WHO'S EVER BEEN FRIENDLY TO ME.

AND BACK AT THE RENDEZVOUS, KENRICK WAS SURPRISED AT THE WARMTH OF THE CORPORAL'S GREETING.
WHEN THAT FLARE WENT UP, I THOUGHT THEY'D SPOTTED YOU... AND WHEN THEY STARTED FIRING... OCH, IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU AGAIN, LADDIE!

AS CAREFULLY AS THEY HAD COME, THEY SLIPPED BACK TO THEIR OWN LINES.
THERE WERE THREE WHERE I WAS, SIR, AND TWO ARMOURED CARS.
WELL DONE... I'VE NO DOUBT THE ARTILLERY WILL BE VERY INTERESTED.
THIS WADI WILL BE THE ONE, SIR. THERE WERE FIVE LORRIES IN FRONT OF ME, DEFINITELY, AND MORE AWAY TO THE RIGHT.

AND AS THE DAYS PASSED, KENRICK REALISED THAT HE WAS GLAD THAT HE HAD CHOSEN TO COME BACK. THE CORPORAL WAS . . . WELL, A GOOD FRIEND. AND EVEN SOME OF THE OTHER CHAPS DID NOT SEEM TOO BAD. NOT THAT THERE WAS MUCH ELSE TO BE HAPPY ABOUT. HAVING RECONQUERED CYRENAICA IN THE SPRING OF 1942, ROMMEL WAS PREPARING A NEW OFFENSIVE. ON THE EVENING OF MAY 26 10,000 VEHICLES OF HIS STRIKING FORCE MOVED FORWARD.

THE ADVENT OF THE AMERICAN TANK . . . THE GRANT . . . AT LAST GAVE THE BRITISH FORCES SOME COUNTER TO THE PANZERS, BUT AS THE BATTLE CONTINUED THROUGHOUT MAY AND JUNE, THE EIGHTH ARMY WAS PUSHED INEXORABLY BACK.

AND ALWAYS IN THE FOREFRONT OF THE FIGHTING WAS THE BATTALION THAT CONTAINED KENRICK AND CORPORAL MC TAGGART.

FOR THE UNIT HAD BECOME DESERT-HARDENED, EXPERIENCED. ALTHOUGH THE MEN WERE WEARY AND EXHAUSTED THEY COULD NOT BE SPARED FROM THE LINE.

BUT THE GERMANS AGAIN AND AGAIN DROVE FORWARD, SEARCHING FOR WEAKNESSES, RUTHLESSLY EXPLOITING THEM WHEN THEY WERE FOUND.

JERRY'S DRIVEN A WEDGE INTO TWELVE PLATOON ON OUR LEFT AND THEY'VE GOT A MACHINE-GUN COVERING THEIR POSITION. WE'RE GOING TO ATTACK THAT MACHINE-GUN FROM THE FLANK AND WIPE IT OUT!

RIGHT, SIR!

SHORT STABS OF FLAME GAVE AWAY THE SPANDAU'S POSITION AS THE SECTION EDGED NEAR IT, HUGGING THE PROTECTING ROCKS WITH THEIR BODIES.

GET READY TO FOLLOW ME... AND GO LIKE BATS OUT OF HELL!

THEY WERE POISED FOR THEIR PERILOUS DASH WHEN A BRITISH MORTAR, TRYING TO RANGE ON THE SPANDAU, DROPPED ITS BOMB WITH HORRIFYING EFFECTIVENESS RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE SECTION.

SHOCKED AND BRUISED, KENRICK LOOKED ABOUT HIM IN A DAZE . . .

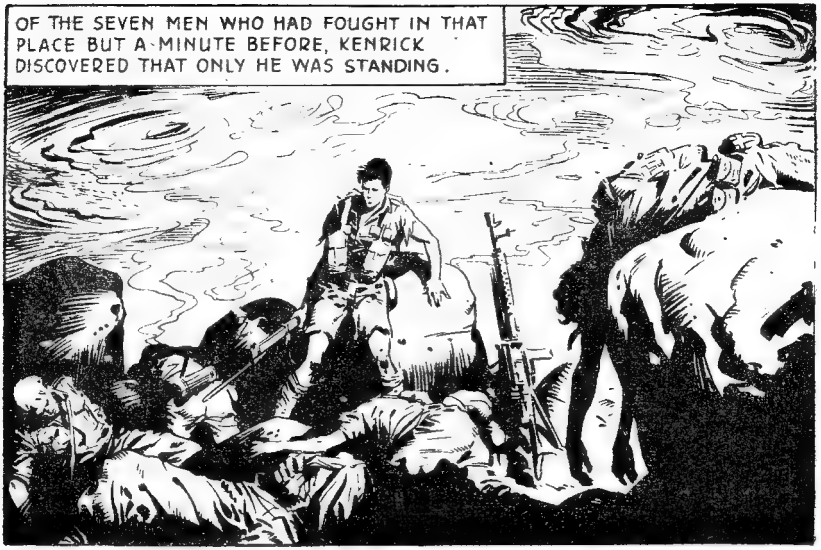
TOBRUK WAS A MAGIC NAME TO THE OLDER DESERT RATS, FOR ITS BRILLIANT DEFENCE IN 1941 HAD HELPED INSTIL THE CONFIDENCE THAT THEY, TOO, WOULD NEVER FINALLY BE DEFEATED.

THE CORPORAL, ALREADY CUT AND BLEEDING, ROSE TO HIS FEET AND HURLED A GRENADE TOWARDS THE SPANDAU NEST.

THEN, YELLING THEIR HOARSE DEFIANCE, THE THREE SURVIVORS CHARGED FORWARD, THEIR WEAPONS HAMMERING DEAFENINGLY.

THE HUDDLED GROUP BEHIND THE GUN, ALTHOUGH STUNNED BY THE GRENADE'S EXPLOSION, NOW TURNED SAVAGELY TO FIGHT FOR THEIR LIVES

AS IN A RED HAZE, KENRICK SAW HIS COMPANIONS FALL AND HE FLUNG HIMSELF VENGEFULLY AT THE ONLY GERMAN STILL ON HIS FEET


OF THE SEVEN MEN WHO HAD FOUGHT IN THAT PLACE BUT A MINUTE BEFORE, KENRICK DISCOVERED THAT ONLY HE WAS STANDING.

DISTRACTEDLY, HE DROPPED TO HIS KNEES BESIDE THE BODY OF CORPORAL MC TAGGART, THE ONLY MAN HE HAD EVER COME TO CALL HIS FRIEND, AND WAS JUST IN TIME TO HEAR THE CORPORAL'S LAST WORDS . . . . . .
CORP! JOCK...
GOOD... LUCK, LADDIE.

NOT CARING WHETHER HE LIVED OR DIED, KENRICK STUMBLED BACK TOWARDS HIS OWN LINES. THERE, ALL WAS CONFUSION . . . . . .
PRIVATE KENRICK REPORTING, SIR... I CAN'T FIND THE COMPANY COMMANDER. WE WIPED OUT THE MACHINE-GUN, SIR, BUT THE REST OF THE SECTION WAS KILLED.
OH, BAD LUCK! BUT WE'RE EVACUATING IN A HURRY. YOU'D BETTER GET YOUR KIT ON ONE OF THESE LORRIES.

BUT, SIR! THE LIEUTENANT... AND CORPORAL MC TAGGART ... THEY'RE DEAD, SIR.
I'M SORRY, KENRICK. IF WE DON'T GET OUT OF HERE, WE WON'T LIVE MUCH LONGER. TOBRUK HAS FALLEN!

KENRICK WAS HUSTLED INTO THE BACK OF ONE OF THE LORRIES WHERE HE HUDDLED IN A CORNER, HIS MIND STRIVING TO GRASP THE MEANING OF WHAT HE HAD JUST BEEN TOLD.
TOBRUK... TOBRUK FALLEN?
YES, MATE. THEY SURRENDERED THIS MORNING.

AS THE TRUCK JOLTED ITS WAY EASTWARDS, KENRICK SUDDENLY CAME ALIVE TO WHAT THAT MEANT.
THIS MORNING? BEFORE WE WENT OUT TO ATTACK THAT GUN .. ARE YOU SURE?
OF COURSE I'M SURE. WHY DO YOU THINK WE'RE PULLING OUT SO FAST? BECAUSE WE'LL BE CUT OFF IF WE DON'T ... JERRY'S ALL ROUND US.
BUT THE CORPORAL WAS TRYING TO GIVE THEM MORE TIME IN TOBRUK... THAT'S WHAT HE DIED FOR... AND THEY'D SURRENDERED ALREADY!
AND SUDDENLY ALL THE OLD BLINDING HATRED WAS BACK. HIS FRIEND ... HIS ONLY FRIEND ... WAS DEAD, HIS LIFE SACRIFICED USELESSLY.

MUTTERING RESENTFULLY TO HIMSELF, KENRICK BEGAN TO CLAMBER OVER THE TAILBOARD OF THE SLOWLY MOVING TRUCK.

THEY'RE NOT KILLING ME FOR NOTHING.

HEY!

HE IGNORED THE STARTLED SHOUTS OF THE MEN WHO HAD SAT NEAR HIM AND DROPPED TO THE GROUND AMONGST THE DUST CHURNED UP BY THE TRUCK'S WHEELS.

BY THE TIME THE OCCUPANTS OF THE TRUCK HAD PERSUADED THE DRIVER TO STOP, THEY WERE A QUARTER OF A MILE FROM WHERE KENRICK HAD DISMOUNTED. IN THE DARKNESS, THEIR BRIEF SEARCH WAS FRUITLESS . .

WE CAN'T HANG ABOUT HERE, ANYWAY! COME ON, LET'S GET GOING!

HE MUST BE BARMY, JUMPING OUT LIKE THAT!

Chapter 3. The Roughneck Aussie

SOUTH OF SOLLUM THE GROUND ROSE TO A ROCKY PLATEAU, BROKEN BY A NUMBER OF WADIS. STUMBLING INTO ONE OF THESE KENRICK FOUND A CLUMP OF THORN BUSHES AND GRATEFULLY FLUNG HIMSELF IN THEIR SHELTER.

BUT SOME HOURS LATER HE AWAKENED WITH A START. IT MUST HAVE BEEN THE NOISE OF ENGINES AND OF VOICES THAT MADE HIM STIR, FOR HE SOON FOUND THAT A GERMAN UNIT HAD CAMPED CLOSE TO HIS RESTING-PLACE.

THE DARKNESS THAT HAD HIDDEN KENRICK WAS ALSO A DANGER. WERE HE TO ANNOUNCE HIS PRESENCE . . . EVEN BY ATTEMPTING TO SURRENDER . . . THESE MEN MIGHT WELL SHOOT FIRST AND ASK QUESTIONS LATER.

CAUTIOUSLY, MOVING ONLY INCHES AT A TIME, KENRICK BACKED UP THE STEEP SIDE OF THE WADI. THERE, HE FOUND A SLIT IN THE HILLSIDE, A FAULT IN THE ROCK FORMATION. IT WAS PARTIALLY OBSCURED BY BUSHES BUT SEEMED DEEP ENOUGH TO OFFER CONCEALMENT.

FEET FIRST, KENRICK SLITHERED INTO THE FISSURE. BUT AT THE VERY MOMENT THAT HE RELAXED IN WHAT SEEMED TO BE SAFETY, A SCREAM ROSE IN HIS THROAT, ONLY TO BE STRANGLED BY AN IRON ARM THAT CLAMPED ITSELF ACROSS HIS THROAT. A VOICE HISSED IN HIS EAR . . .

GASPING FOR BREATH, KENRICK FROZE IN RESPONSE TO THAT DIRE THREAT . . .

SO YOU UNDERSTAND ENGLISH, EH? WELL, LET'S HEAR FROM YOU!

I'M AN ENGLISH SOLDIER . . . KENRICK'S MY NAME!

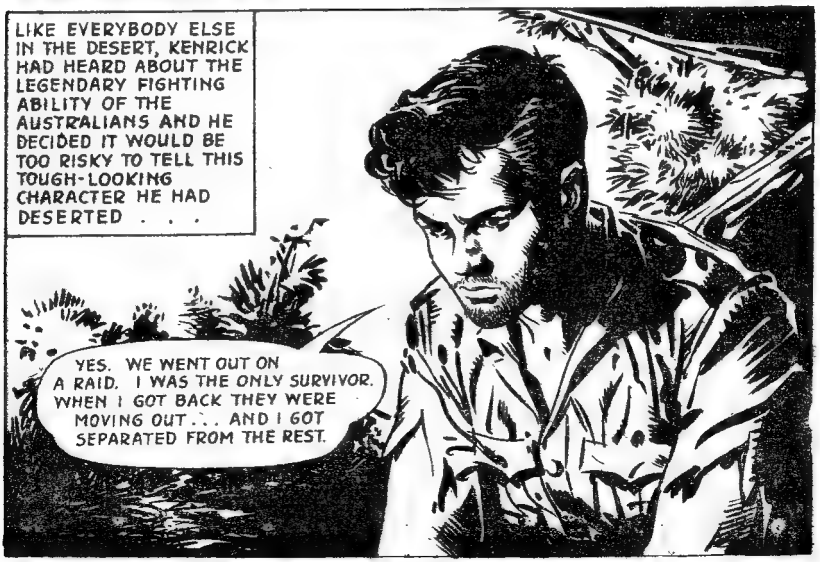
AT ONCE HIS CAPTOR RELAXED HIS STRANGLEHOLD . . .

ENGLISH, EH? WELL, THERE'S A TROOP OF JERRY ARMOURED CARS DOWN THERE, COBBER, SO LIE DOWN AND KEEP QUIET.

SO KENRICK LAY THERE TILL DAWN CAME AND SHOWED HIM AN UNSHAVEN, LEATHER-SKINNED AUSTRALIAN, WITH STREAKS OF BLOOD CRUSTED ON THE SIDE OF HIS FACE.

DAVE JOHNSON, SPORT, FROM MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA. SORRY I WAS SO ROUGH ON YOU BUT I WASN'T EXPECTING VISITORS.

FRANK KENRICK, I'M FROM DURHAM.
GLAD TO KNOW YOU . . . WELCOME TO AUSTRALIA HOUSE. I'VE BEEN HERE THREE DAYS. WE HAD A BIT OF A SHINDIG DOWN IN THE WADI AND I COPPED ONE ON MY HEAD. RECKON MY PALS THOUGHT I WAS DONE FOR AND LEFT ME. YOU GET LEFT BEHIND, TOO?


LIKE EVERYBODY ELSE IN THE DESERT, KENRICK HAD HEARD ABOUT THE LEGENDARY FIGHTING ABILITY OF THE AUSTRALIANS AND HE DECIDED IT WOULD BE TOO RISKY TO TELL THIS TOUGH-LOOKING CHARACTER HE HAD DESERTED . . .
YES. WE WENT OUT ON A RAID. I WAS THE ONLY SURVIVOR. WHEN I GOT BACK THEY WERE MOVING OUT . . . AND I GOT SEPARATED FROM THE REST.

THOUGH WELL-HIDDEN, THE TWO MEN WERE IN DESPERATE STRAITS; THEY HAD NO FOOD, NO BLANKETS TO WARD OFF THE ICY COLDNESS OF THE DESERT NIGHTS AND THE AUSTRALIAN HAD RUN OUT OF WATER.

THE ADVANCING GERMANS HAD ESTABLISHED A POLICE POST TO DIRECT SECTIONS OF THE AFRIKA KORPS ARMOUR INTO DIFFERENT WADIS SO THAT THEY MIGHT HAVE SOME COVER FROM THE MARAUDING BRITISH AIRCRAFT.

THERE WAS A WEALTH OF MEANING IN JOHNSON'S LEAN GRIN . . AND IT FRIGHTENED KENRICK . .

BUT WE'RE NOT ARMED.. HOW CAN...

DON'T LET THAT WORRY YOU, DIGGER!

AS THEY WAITED FOR THE SUN TO GO DOWN, KENRICK WRESTLED WITH HIS NEW DILEMMA. THIS SUICIDAL AUSTRALIAN WAS DRAGGING HIM BACK INTO THE BATTLE HE THOUGHT HE HAD LEFT FOREVER.

WE'VE *GOT* TO HAVE FOOD AND WATER BUT, CURSE IT, I DON'T WANT TO FIGHT FOR IT.

NO FURTHER GERMANS MOVED INTO THE WADI AND THEY MADE THEIR PREPARATIONS. JOHNSON WAS OBVIOUSLY EXPERIENCED IN THIS KIND OF NIGHT OPERATION.

YOU WANT A BIT MORE MUCK ON YOUR FACE... I CAN STILL SEE IT. NOW, COME ON, BEFORE THAT MOON COMES UP!

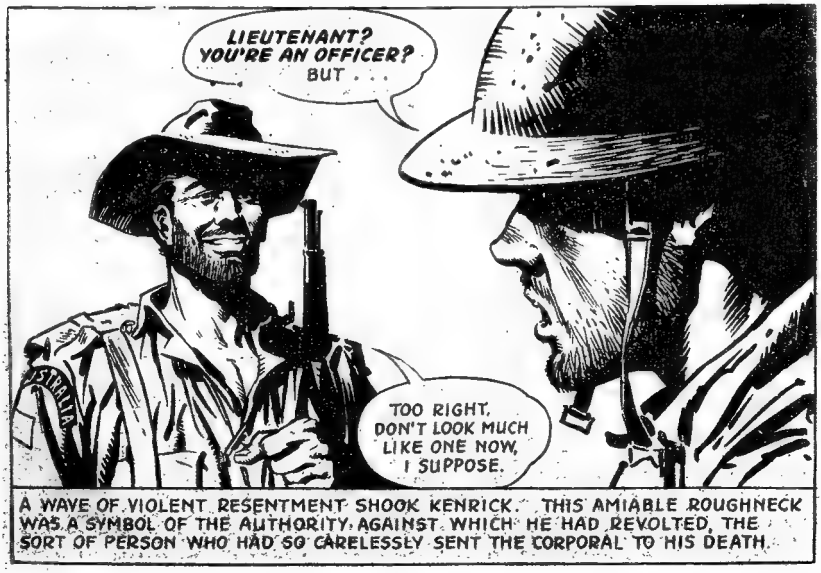
THE DARKNESS WAS INTENSE. AS THEY NEARED THE END OF THE WADI JOHNSON CONTINUALLY PRESSED HIMSELF FLAT ON THE GROUND UNTIL FINALLY HE WAS ABLE TO SILHOUETTE A TREE AGAINST THE SKY.
STEALTHILY NOW, THEY INCHED FORWARD UNTIL THEY COULD SEE THE SENTRY DOZING ON A BOULDER. THE AUSSIE ADVANCED ALONE . . .

AN ARM SUDDENLY CLAMPED ITSELF ROUND THE SENTRY'S NECK AND THE CRY THAT ROSE IN HIS THROAT WAS CHOKED OFF SHORT.

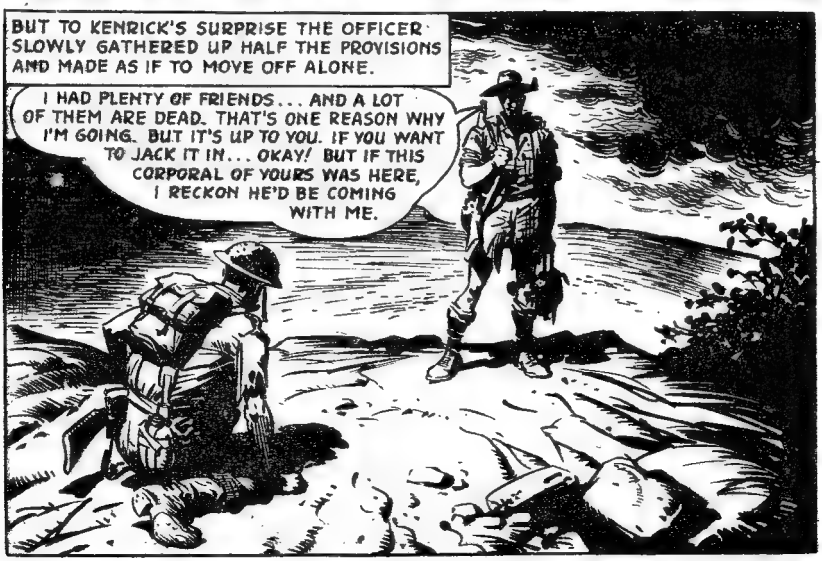
BUT ALTHOUGH JOHNSON HAD BEEN AS SILENT AS THE GRAVE, THE SENTRY'S STRANGLED GRUNT HAD DISTURBED THE SLEEP OF THE OTHER GERMANS.
HANS... WHAT...
GET THE OTHER JERRY! I'LL TACKLE THIS ONE!

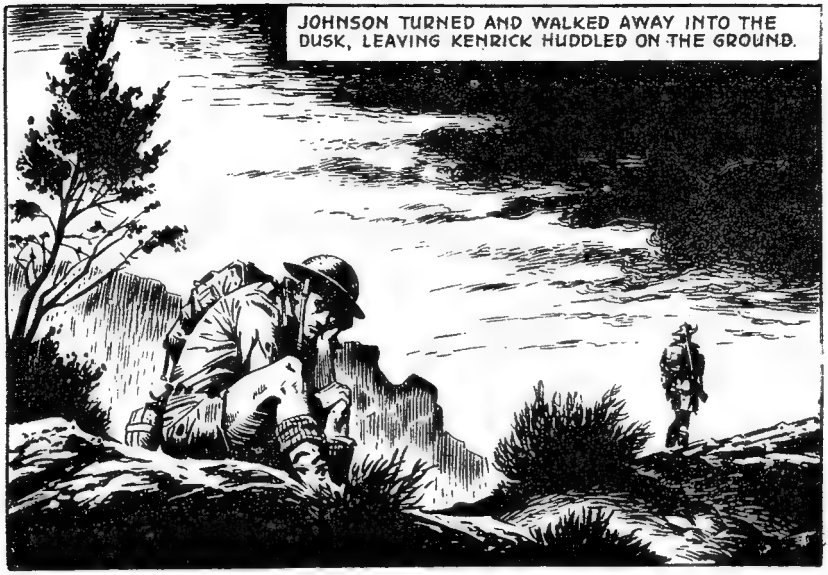
IN SECONDS IT WAS OVER AND THEN THEY GATHERED WHAT THEY HAD COME FOR.
NOW WE CAN LOOK AFTER OURSELVES ON OUR TREK OUT OF HERE.
BUT WHERE ARE WE GOING?
THE WAY I SEE IT THE EIGHTH ARMY HAS TO MAKE A STAND IN THE NEXT COUPLE OF HUNDRED MILES OR ROMMEL'S GOING TO GET THE NILE. AND IF THERE'S GOING TO BE A BIG BATTLE, I WANT TO BE IN IT.
TWO HUNDRED MILES!
THERE WAS NO SUGGESTION OF DOUBT IN THE AUSTRALIAN'S VOICE . . . .
IT'S BEEN DONE BEFORE. WE COULD PINCH THOSE MOTOR BIKES BUT WE'D BE SPOTTED IN DAYLIGHT . . . AND WE COULDN'T USE THEM AT NIGHT. WHAT DO YOU SAY, FRANK?
OH . . . ALL RIGHT!

BUT BEFORE THEY STARTED, JOHNSON, WHO, IN FACT, REALISED VERY CLEARLY HOW DANGEROUS THEIR TREK WAS LIKELY TO BE, SUGGESTED THEY MIGHT SWAP HOME ADDRESSES, IN CASE ONLY ONE OF THEM SURVIVED.
THERE'S NO ONE TO TELL ABOUT ME.
EH? OH... WELL THAT'S MINE... I'D LIKE THE OLD FOLKS TO KNOW WHAT HAPPENED.
... YOU MIGHT TELL THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY, TOO, IN CASE THEY'RE CURIOUS, ABOUT LIEUTENANT JOHNSON.


LIEUTENANT? YOU'RE AN OFFICER? BUT . . .
TOO RIGHT. DON'T LOOK MUCH LIKE ONE NOW, I SUPPOSE.
A WAVE OF VIOLENT RESENTMENT SHOOK KENRICK. THIS AMIABLE ROUGHNECK WAS A SYMBOL OF THE AUTHORITY AGAINST WHICH HE HAD REVOLTED, THE SORT OF PERSON WHO HAD SO CARELESSLY SENT THE CORPORAL TO HIS DEATH.

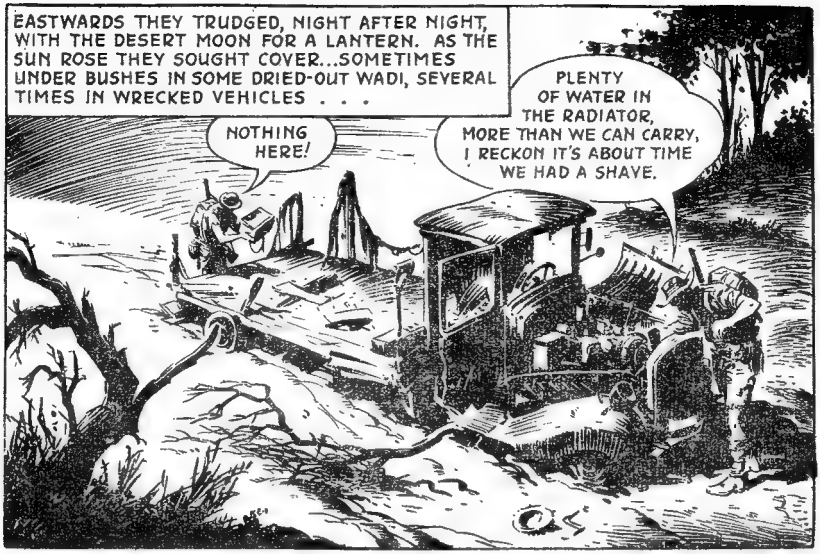
BUT THE RAGE SWIFTLY DISSOLVED INTO HOPELESS FRUSTRATION AND SUDDENLY, KENRICK FOUND HIMSELF SOBBING OUT HIS STORY . . .
. . . AND WHEN I TURNED ROUND HE WAS DEAD. HE JUST SAID 'GOOD LUCK, LADDIE' AND HE DIED. AND NOW YOU WANT TO GET ME KILLED . . . WHAT FOR? I'M NOT COMING, I TELL YOU . . . I'M NOT COMING!

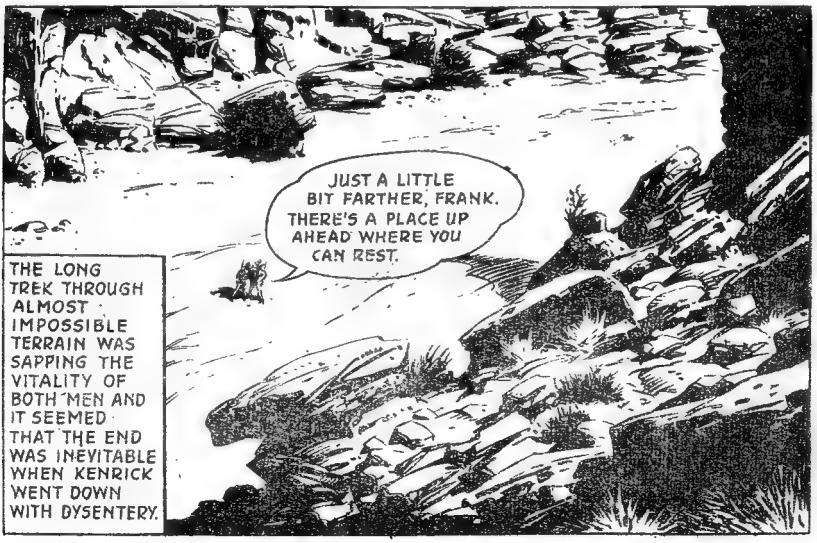

BUT TO KENRICK'S SURPRISE THE OFFICER SLOWLY GATHERED UP HALF THE PROVISIONS AND MADE AS IF TO MOVE OFF ALONE.
I HAD PLENTY OF FRIENDS . . . AND A LOT OF THEM ARE DEAD. THAT'S ONE REASON WHY I'M GOING. BUT IT'S UP TO YOU. IF YOU WANT TO JACK IT IN . . . OKAY! BUT IF THIS CORPORAL OF YOURS WAS HERE, I RECKON HE'D BE COMING WITH ME.

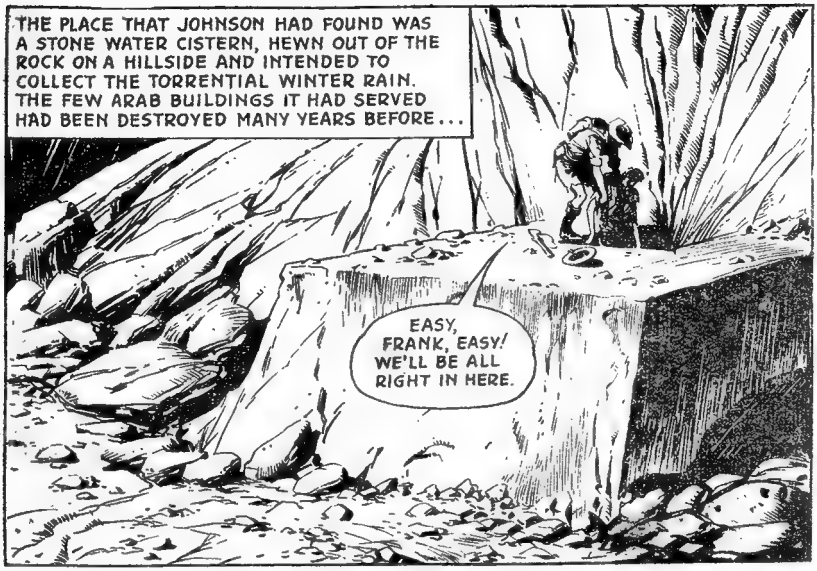

JOHNSON TURNED AND WALKED AWAY INTO THE DUSK, LEAVING KENRICK HUDDLED ON THE GROUND.

AND AS HE SAT THERE ALONE, KENRICK THOUGHT OF THE AUSTRALIAN'S PARTING WORDS AND KNEW THEY WERE TRUE . . .
AND MC TAGGART WOULD HAVE EXPECTED ME TO GO, TOO!

KENRICK ROSE TO HIS FEET, COLLECTED HIS EQUIPMENT AND SET OUT AFTER THE AUSTRALIAN. HE HAD NOT GONE FAR WHEN THE LANKY FIGURE LOOMED UP OUT OF THE DARKNESS.
GOOD ON YOU, SPORT. GLAD TO SEE YOU.


EASTWARDS THEY TRUDGED, NIGHT AFTER NIGHT, WITH THE DESERT MOON FOR A LANTERN. AS THE SUN ROSE THEY SOUGHT COVER...SOMETIMES UNDER BUSHES IN SOME DRIED-OUT WADI, SEVERAL TIMES IN WRECKED VEHICLES . . .
NOTHING HERE!
PLENTY OF WATER IN THE RADIATOR, MORE THAN WE CAN CARRY, I RECKON IT'S ABOUT TIME WE HAD A SHAVE.


JUST A LITTLE BIT FARTHER, FRANK. THERE'S A PLACE UP AHEAD WHERE YOU CAN REST.
THE LONG TREK THROUGH ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TERRAIN WAS SAPPING THE VITALITY OF BOTH MEN AND IT SEEMED THAT THE END WAS INEVITABLE WHEN KENRICK WENT DOWN WITH DYSENTERY.


THE PLACE THAT JOHNSON HAD FOUND WAS A STONE WATER CISTERN, HEWN OUT OF THE ROCK ON A HILLSIDE AND INTENDED TO COLLECT THE TORRENTIAL WINTER RAIN. THE FEW ARAB BUILDINGS IT HAD SERVED HAD BEEN DESTROYED MANY YEARS BEFORE...
EASY, FRANK, EASY! WE'LL BE ALL RIGHT IN HERE.

FOR WEEKS, KENRICK LAY IN THE WELCOME COOLNESS OF THAT STONE BUILDING, FIGHTING THE DELIRIUM AND PAIN THAT CONVULSED HIM...AND ALWAYS BY HIS SIDE WAS JOHNSON . . .

FOOD, WATER, AND FINALLY THE IMPOSSIBLE THING . . . MEDICINE, JOHNSON PROVIDED THEM ALL AND SOME WEEKS LATER WHEN KENRICK WAS WELL ON THE WAY TO RECOVERY...

BUT WHERE DID YOU GET ALL THIS STUFF?

THERE'S AN ITALIAN DUMP ABOUT FIVE MILES AWAY... I KIND OF...BORROWED THEM.

BUT KENRICK KNEW TOO WELL WHAT LAY BEHIND THAT JAUNTY STATEMENT. THE AUSTRALIAN HAD RISKED HIS LIFE TO GET THOSE THINGS.

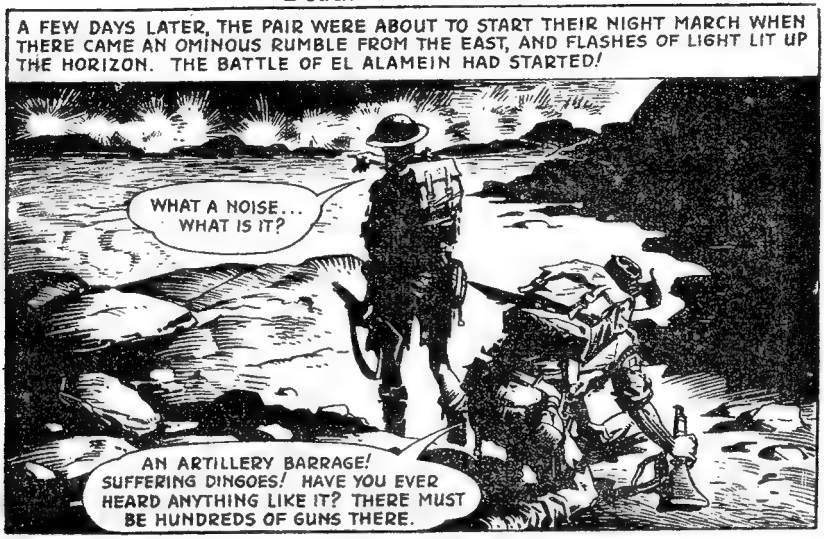
I WOULDN'T BE ALIVE BUT FOR YOU. I'D LIKE TO SAY THANK YOU.

DON'T BE SILLY, FRANK... YOU'RE JUST HARD TO KILL.

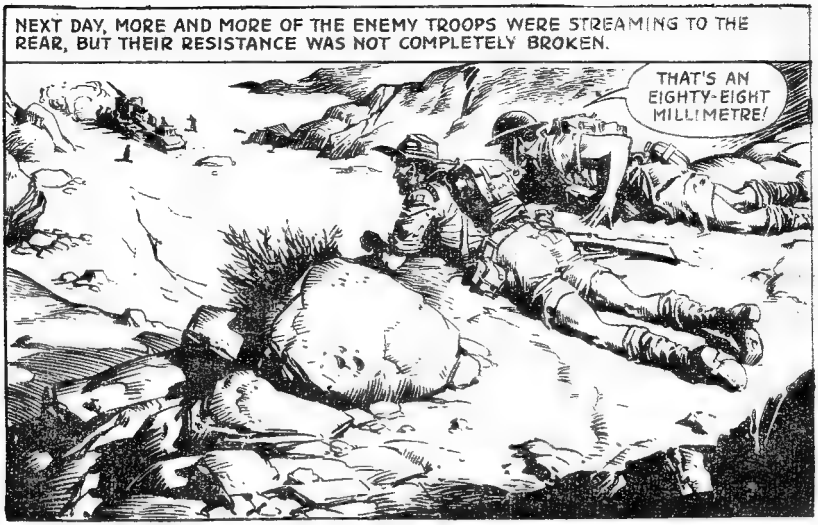
AS KENRICK GOT STRONGER, THE PAIR CONSIDERED THEIR NEXT ACTION . . .

BLENHEIMS. THERE'S SOMETHING BIG BREWING UP... THE R.A.F. ARE NEVER OUT OF THE SKY.

WE'D BETTER START MOVING THEN, WE MIGHT JUST BE IN TIME.


A FEW DAYS LATER, THE PAIR WERE ABOUT TO START THEIR NIGHT MARCH WHEN THERE CAME AN OMINOUS RUMBLE FROM THE EAST, AND FLASHES OF LIGHT LIT UP THE HORIZON. THE BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN HAD STARTED!
WHAT A NOISE... WHAT IS IT?
AN ARTILLERY BARRAGE! SUFFERING DINGOES! HAVE YOU EVER HEARD ANYTHING LIKE IT? THERE MUST BE HUNDREDS OF GUNS THERE.

THEY'RE RETREATING! THE EIGHTH ARMY'S DONE IT! WE WON'T HAVE TO WALK MUCH FARTHER.
THEY WERE BRITISH GUNS, 1,200 OF THEM PROVIDING A TREMENDOUS CONCENTRATION OF ARTILLERY FIRE THAT PRESAGED THE ALLIED OFFENSIVE. FIRST THE ITALIAN TROOPS AND THEN THE AFRIKA KORPS WILTED AND BROKE.


NEXT DAY, MORE AND MORE OF THE ENEMY TROOPS WERE STREAMING TO THE REAR, BUT THEIR RESISTANCE WAS NOT COMPLETELY BROKEN.
THAT'S AN EIGHTY-EIGHT MILLIMETRE!

AS THEY WATCHED, THE GERMANS CONSTRUCTED A ROUGH EMPLACEMENT FOR THE GUN ON THE SIDE OF THE WADI.
THEY'RE DIGGING IT IN SO THAT IT COVERS THE ROAD, THEN THEY'LL USE IT TO PROTECT THEIR RETREAT.

THIS WAS THE CHANCE JOHNSON HAD BEEN WAITING FOR . . . THE OPPORTUNITY TO JOIN IN THE BATTLE . . . AND THIS TIME KENRICK FELT NO RELUCTANCE TO JOIN HIM.
THEY'VE ONLY LEFT FOUR MEN TO SERVE THAT GUN. WE CAN DEAL WITH THEM . . . AND THEN WE'LL USE IT OURSELVES.

ONCE MORE THE PAIR WERE CREEPING UP ON A GERMAN ARMED POST . . . BUT THIS TIME THEY WERE ARMED.

ACHTUNG! ACHTUNG... AARGH!
THE ROCK-BUILT BREASTWORK GAVE THE GERMANS SOME PROTECTION AND THEIR LOOK-OUT WAS ALERT, BUT JOHNSON AND KENRICK WERE ON HIM BEFORE HE COULD OPEN FIRE . . .

LOOK OUT!
THREE OF THE ENEMY WERE CUT DOWN IN AS MANY SECONDS BUT THE FOURTH HAD TIME TO AIM HIS PISTOL . . . AT THE AUSTRALIAN.

A SHOT FROM KENRICK'S RIFLE KILLED THE GERMAN BUT IT WAS TOO LATE: JOHNSON COLLAPSED AGAINST THE SIDE OF THE EMPLACEMENT.
GUESS I'VE COPPED ONE, FRANK. BUT DON'T WORRY... THERE ARE LOTS OF YOUR MATES COMING THIS WAY PRETTY SOON. GOOD LUCK, COBBER!
THE FIRST RAYS OF DAWN WERE LIGHTENING THE SKY AS THE AUSTRALIAN DIED AND FOR A SECOND TIME KENRICK STOOD OVER THE BODY OF A MAN WHO HAD BEEN HIS FRIEND . . .

BUT THIS TIME KENRICK'S RESOLUTION DID NOT FALTER. TWO MEN HAD BEFRIENDED HIM AND UNDER THEIR INFLUENCE HE HAD BECOME A BETTER MAN. NOW OTHER FRIENDS, HIS COUNTRYMEN AND THEIR ALLIES, WERE FIGHTING THEIR WAY TOWARDS HIM. AND THERE WAS SOMETHING HE COULD DO TO HELP. AS THE FIRST OF THE RETREATING GERMAN PANZERS CAME INTO VIEW KENRICK SWUNG THE GUN TOWARDS IT . . . . . .

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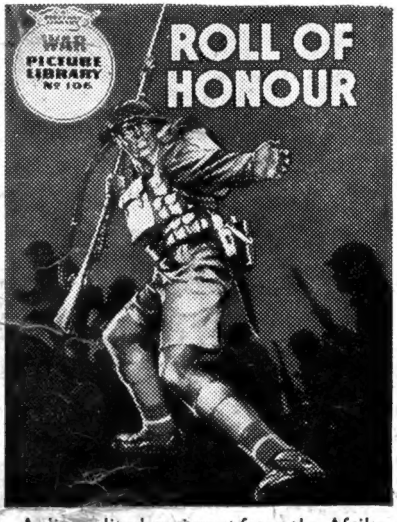

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